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Westmoreland, Quizzed in Trial, Denies He Changed Data for Political Reasons

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NEW YORK—William C. Westmoreland's \$120 million libel suit against CBS Inc. reached a dramatic peak this week as the 70-year-old retired general, under often-blistering questioning by network attorney David Boies, repeatedly denied he had altered estimates of enemy strength in Vietnam for political reasons.

But during four hours of cross-examination Wednesday, Gen. Westmoreland, looking uncomfortable and appearing to contradict himself on several occasions, conceded that if a report from his intelligence chief showing significantly higher estimates of the enemy's "irregular" forces had been forwarded to Washington in the spring of 1967, it would have created a "major public relations problem."

At first, the general tried to minimize the importance of a meeting in May of that year with his intelligence chief, Gen. Joseph McChristian, which is one of the focal points of the trial, now in its seventh week. He said the unscheduled, late-evening session was so "inconsequential" that he neglected to include it in his diary of the war.

But moments later, when asked by Mr. Boies why he refused to forward the new intelligence data, Gen. Westmoreland gathered by Gen. McChristian to Washington, he said the matter was so important it required further consideration. "No responsible executive is going to rubber-stamp something of this relative importance," he said, "without being briefed on what it was all about."

Better Intelligence Gathering

What concerned Gen. Westmoreland at the time, he testified, was that the higher number of self-defense forces and political cadre that Gen. McChristian wanted to pass along might be interpreted as evidence that the size of the enemy had increased, when in his judgment it was only the intelligence gathering that had improved. He said that as a result of the briefings he received on the subject, he subsequently ordered these irregular forces removed from periodic reports of enemy strength, known as the order of battle.



Gen. Westmoreland

"I never interfered with the numbers involved," Gen. Westmoreland told the jury Wednesday during an impassioned defense of his actions. "All I did was revise the categories to get a better representation of the fighting enemy. That was my prerogative, and I'd do it again."

Gen. Westmoreland's motives in revising the order of battle are at the heart of his dispute with CBS. The 1982 documentary, "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," which the general says libeled him, suggested that Gen. McChristian's report had been suppressed for political reasons. Gen. McChristian, who is expected to be the network's first witness, is quoted on the program as saying that Gen. Westmoreland told him the increased figures "would create a political bombshell."

During direct testimony last week, Gen. Westmoreland said the term "political bombshell" was "not in my lexicon." On Wednesday, when Mr. Boies showed him an excerpt from a pre-trial deposition in which he used the term, the general accused the

CBS lawyer of having "thrust it right into my lexicon." The remark drew considerable laughter from the packed courtroom.

But a few minutes later, the general said the words he did use during his meeting with Gen. McChristian meant the same thing. "I said if this cable goes forward," Gen. Westmoreland testified, "it could have been a major public relations problem."

Political Motivation Alleged

During frequent clashes with Gen. Westmoreland on Wednesday, Mr. Boies sought to portray the general's actions as having been politically motivated. He suggested that the general was worried about the effect of Gen. McChristian's revised estimates on his request for an additional 200,000 American troops that was pending at the time. And in one particularly sharp exchange, he challenged the general's statements that the enemy's self-defense forces and political cadre weren't a military threat.

The general alternately asserted that he left intelligence matters to his subordinates and that he occasionally had to "restrain" intelligence officers who had a tendency to overestimate enemy strength. When pressed by Mr. Boies to explain why he challenged Gen. McChristian's revised estimates in the spring of 1967, the general said, "Intelligence organizations tend to be myopic. They get Brownie points for finding more enemy. It's the old cover-your-backside syndrome."